

Does Substitute Teaching Before Graduation Improve First Year Teacher Quality?

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Several problems exert force on teachers just entering the profession including mandated testing, public reporting, and the loss of the flexible contexts teacher preparation institutions had for developing undergraduate teacher candidates. Teacher training institutions are scrambling to implement more effective ways to prepare teachers without losing richness and thoroughness. The problems of entry level teacher quality and the opportunity to gain experience through substitute teaching are related. Enhancing the development of pre-service teacher quality is directly influenced by “real” teaching experience. The Northeast Nebraska Teacher Academy is a palpable response undertaken by a Midwestern public college to provide these types of experiences for teacher candidates and how those experiences influenced the preparation of graduates for professional success.

Several problems are exerting substantial force on teachers just entering the profession. Among those contemporary problems is mandated K-12 instructional and curricular reform. This reform also includes the additional pressure created by the higher stakes now involved with testing students and reporting the results of those tests in more and more public ways. One of the problems entry-level teachers must face also in response to federal mandates is the lessening of the flexible contexts higher education teacher preparation institutions used to have for those initial years of development and nurturing into the profession during undergraduate programs. The public and their public officials want more highly-qualified teachers and they want them yesterday. Teacher training institutions have scrambled (and are scrambling) to identify more effective ways to prepare the next generation of teachers. While some processes can be speeded up, most can't be accelerated without losing some of the richness and thoroughness of the experience.

It is our thesis that the problems of entry level teacher quality and the opportunity to gain experience through substitute teaching are related. According to Darling-Hammond (1996) the variable with the greatest single impact on student learning is the professional competence of the teacher. Numerous means are available to enhance in-service teacher quality, but what about pre-service teacher quality that can be quite directly influenced by “real” teaching experience? The Northeast Nebraska Teacher Academy is a palpable response to this dilemma. This article is written to describe the process undertaken by our Midwestern public college to provide these

types of experiences for our teacher candidates and how those experiences influenced the preparation of our graduates for professional success.

Framing the Challenge: The Quantity of Available Substitutes

This entire process was motivated by the substitute teacher shortages in the late 1990s. A survey of fourteen area school districts indicated that there were 337 days (more than 24 per district) when one or more substitute teacher requests could not be filled during the 1998-99 school year. Even though several states had enacted legislation reducing the requirements to qualify for certain types of substitute teaching certificates, serious substitute teacher shortages still existed. These certification modifications did increase the *quantity* of available substitute teachers, but they did little to focus on the issue of improving substitute *quality*.

This problem was further exacerbated when several in the pool of current substitutes signed long-term substitute contracts accepting full-time teaching assignments for which there had been no regular applicants. These depletions of the substitute pool also had an impact on the already full schedules of the other classroom teachers when they had to be asked to “cover” the workload of colleagues who were absent.

Framing the Challenge: The Quality of Available Substitutes

Closely tied to the availability of substitute teachers is the concern of substitute teacher quality and effectiveness. When a shortage of quality substitutes exists, teachers and administrators must struggle with whether the potential gains realized from staff development will offset a potential loss of learning for students when the regular teacher is absent.

Goldenhersh (1995) indicates that improvement of the productivity of substitute teachers must be realized through development of specific programs to improve effective substitute teacher training in public schools. Tomlinson (1997) suggests that training can be an effective way to improve substitute teachers’ skills and confidence level. Ostapczuk (1994) has suggested that the most important strategies for the improvement of substitute teaching is through providing training on topics such as discipline and classroom management. Some higher education institutions have responded to these concerns by developing substitute teacher workshops and on-line resources to successfully facilitate the development of higher quality substitutes. While these initiatives served to make contributions to substituting, we desired to

parallel these initiatives with our own initiative of improving entry-level teacher quality which in turn would affect teacher retention in the initial years of teaching.

A Response to Entry-Level Teacher Quality and Substitute Teacher Shortages

In collaboration with area school districts, the teacher preparation unit within the School of Education & Counseling at Wayne State College (NE), a traditional teacher education institution, set out to find a long-term solution to the dilemma. Armed with the need to address the problem as identified by school administrators, the survey results and a desire to positively affect the quality of entry-level teachers, Wayne State College and thirteen area school districts developed the Northeast Nebraska Teacher Academy (*NENTA*). This program selects, prepares and supports a group of qualified undergraduate teacher candidates to serve as paid, certified, substitute teachers in the consortium school districts.

The following goals were used to guide our efforts:

1. The *NENTA* would increase the pool of substitute teachers in this region.
2. Through a sophisticated process of selection, preparation and support the *NENTA* would ensure that consistent, *quality* instruction would continue when *NENTA* substitute teachers were present.
3. The presence of a *NENTA* substitute would raise the level of K-12 *student* expectations regarding learning when a substitute teacher is present.
4. The additional training and substituting experiences acquired by *NENTA* substitutes would facilitate a higher entry-level quality for those candidates as first year teachers, and that the enhanced successes of these entry-level candidates would likewise positively affect the likelihood that they would remain in the profession.

To ensure the successful achievement of these goals, the *NENTA* director and coordinator developed three cornerstones to guide the program. Those cornerstones are Selection, Preparation and Support. These became the foundation upon which all decisions are made for the benefit of the *NENTA* substitute teachers and school district partners.

Selection

Students are carefully screened for participation in the *NENTA*. The requirements were designed to insure that students selected would be successful. Students must have completed 60

credit hours of college coursework (a state local substitute licensure requirement), and course work in educational foundations, child development, working with special populations, and strategies in diversity education. Additionally, students must possess a cumulative grade point average of 3.3 or better (on a 4.0 scale), have successfully completed all three sections of the Pre-Professional Skills Test (Praxis I) and have positive recommendations from field experiences and college faculty. Faculty recommendations include evaluations of class attendance, punctuality and participation, assuming and seeking responsibility, completing assignments in a competent and timely manner, and the exhibition of the attitudes and dispositions congruent with a professional educator.

In addition to the state local substitute licensure requirement of 60 college credits completed and a course in diversity education, the candidate must also pass a background check. This level of licensure qualifies the holder to substitute a maximum of forty days total per year within the consortium of thirteen school districts. The licensure allows individuals to substitute in any content area or grade level K-12.

Faculty in the School of Education worked to build master course schedules that would allow *NENTA* participants to maintain full academic course loads by enrolling for classes either on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday only, or on Tuesday and Thursday only, thus freeing up two or three days per week for substituting in consortium schools.

Preparation

To ensure substitute teacher quality, a multi-faceted on-going training program was developed. There are three key elements of that preparation process. Element one occurs prior to the resumption of classes in the fall semester when all *NENTA* substitute teachers attend a full-day workshop delivered by the program director and coordinator who are faculty members in the School of Education. Topics included using effective instructional strategies, classroom organization and management, interpreting lesson plans, professional conduct, communication strategies, completion of evaluative paperwork, and instruction specific to *NENTA* substitute responsibilities.

For element two, the *NENTA* has a contract with APL Associates a professional staff development organization from Syracuse, New York who delivers five full days of training for *NENTA* participants with a specific focus on classroom organization, student motivation and

management, and research-based instructional strategies. An additional benefit is realized in that teachers in most *NENTA* districts have also completed APL training. Familiarity with and consistency in the use of instructional strategies already in use by consortium schools is a key feature in the success of the *NENTA* substituting program.

For element three, the *NENTA* substitutes are required to attend a weekly one hour seminar for credit on campus conducted by the program coordinator and director. These seminars expand on the topics from both the one day workshop and APL training. The seminars allow students to share substitute teaching experiences, further interpret lesson plans, to identify more effective ways to communicate, to interact with professors and peers, to assess and reflect upon substituting experiences, engage in problem-solving activities and to pose questions and contribute to discussion relevant to issues such as classroom management, effective instruction, and student assessment.

Support

One of the key features of this program was the identifying of one or more classroom educators in each of the school district partner buildings to serve as on-site mentor teachers. Mentor teachers complete on-line training sessions developed by the program coordinator. The training is designed to orient mentor teachers to their responsibilities on behalf of the program primarily to in-service their building faculty on how to work with *NENTA* substitute teachers, how to assemble their individual substitute teacher folders, and explaining the nature and scope of lesson planning for a *NENTA* substitute. These individuals also assist the *NENTA* substitutes on-site. Mentor teachers help their building colleagues compile their individual Teacher Folders so that each substitute has the teacher's schedule, lesson plans for the day, seating charts, equipment location and instructions for use and any special instructions.

Additionally, a Building Folder is created by the mentor teacher and building administrator for *NENTA* substitutes' use including a building map, master schedule, information and location about media center, nurse's office, emergency procedures, school specific policies, school district expectations for substitute teachers, parking instructions, and other relevant information. The *NENTA* evaluation forms to be used for each substitute teaching experience are included in the Building Folder. Mentor teachers meet *NENTA* substitutes upon their arrival, and

are responsible for maintaining periodic contact with the *NENTA* substitute during the course of their substituting day.

Mentor teachers also coordinate on-site the multi-layered evaluative process that takes place for every substitute teaching experience. Mentor teachers assist with communication between the program director and coordinator, school district teachers and administrators, and the program secretary who receives requests, arranges for substitutes and assists in the billing processes.

NENTA Substitute Compensation

NENTA substitutes are required to substitute teach twice during each semester of participation. However, they are encouraged to substitute as frequently as their academic and personal schedules allow, but participants are solely responsible for deciding when and how many total substituting experiences they accept. Substitute jobs are secured using an on-line booking website created for *NENTA* or by direct calls to substitutes by building administrators, or substitute callers. *NENTA* substitute teachers are paid a flat rate for each half day or full day of substituting, and they are paid mileage from Wayne State College to the schools and back to encourage substituting experiences in the more distant districts.

Benefits to the Student Participants

There are considerable and significant benefits to be accrued by the undergraduate students who are selected to participate in the *NENTA* program. Those benefits include entering student teaching with approximately double the field experience hours of non-participating students. Their participation is recognized as an Honors Program in Teacher Education. Students also build a professional network of contacts in the field of education while undertaking a part-time job within the field of education. This experience provides for continuing support such as on-site mentoring while substituting and continuing development through the weekly seminars. Students embrace a more realistic teaching experience when compared to traditional field experience and have multiple opportunities to assess participating school districts for both student teaching and regular teaching opportunities. Intrinsically, participants more fully develop a Reflective Teaching Model through self-evaluation and the sharing of experiences. These hands-on teaching experiences encourage intellectual, reflective, managerial and

instructional growth and facilitate quicker acquisition and advancement of teaching skills. Students have the opportunity to build a professional reputation prior to student teaching, and they return to their upper level methods coursework with renewed interest in enhancing their instructional and managerial skills. The more obvious extrinsic benefits include the salary and mileage compensations, preferential scheduling (MWF or TR only schedule) and priority registration status, and the benefits of using and interpreting classroom teacher created lesson plans using a recommended lesson plan framework.

Funding the Substitute Teacher Consortium

Original funding for this program came from a competitive grant which was awarded over the three-year period of 2000-2003. The grant enabled the consortium to put the program into place. Since that time, the program is self-sustaining by virtue of the annual participation fees paid by participating districts (assessed on K-12 student population) and the financial/in-kind support from Wayne State College. These sources serve to financially perpetuate the *NENTA*. Each district is charged per day or half day for each substitute. Substitutes are paid a salary per day or half day plus mileage pro-rated from the campus. The average substitute compensation per day is \$90.00 and per half day is \$62.50.

Program Assessment

The assessment process for *NENTA* is conducted by the program director and coordinator with administrative assistance. Assessment is based upon an impact analysis process. To evaluate the impact of this program, assessments are made on the overall progress toward achieving the objectives through a triangulation of the data based on the three completed follow up evaluative instruments: one by the substitute teacher, one by the teacher for whom the substitute taught, and one by the building administrator. All data from these key assessments is examined and collated into an annual report. That report is published and made available to all participants. The Substitute and Teacher Forms are collected following completion by the mentor teacher who forwards them by mail to the program coordinator. The substitute teacher self-reflection form is completed by the substitute and given directly to the program coordinator. In this reflection, substitutes are asked to identify what went well and why; what specific

significant learning occurred during that experience; and to identify skills to target for improvement and/or initiation of use.

Additionally, at the beginning and end of the each college semester, *NENTA* participants complete an attitude inventory that provides an opportunity to reflect on their readiness for substituting and to evaluate the effects of the preparation and support on substituting success. Comparisons are made between the beginning and ending responses and are included in the annual report.

Program Outcomes

At the end of each academic semester, the completed assessment forms are reviewed by program coordinator and director and individual conferences are held with each *NENTA* participant to share information and gain greater insight into making processes more efficient. The following are highlighted summaries of outcomes as reported from those key assessments in these first years of the *NENTA* program.

In the nine years of the program over 3,300 substitute teacher days have been covered. Of those experiences, *NENTA* school administrators responded in follow-up surveys that over 99.5 percent of the substituting experiences were “successful” and that, in all but fifteen instances, administrators welcomed *NENTA* substitutes’ return to their buildings to substitute again.

Classroom teacher comments in follow-up evaluation forms have been overwhelmingly positive as well. Many of those comments were based on feedback received from their K-12 students when the regular classroom teacher returned to the classroom. The positive feedback came in each of the following areas: following lesson plans satisfactorily, student time-on-task, receiving a positive reaction from the K-12 students, leaving materials and assignments in an organized manner, and responding affirmatively to wanting this substitute teacher to return to their classroom as a substitute.

With respect to how the substitutes rated their experiences, over 95 percent of *NENTA* substitutes responded positively to all areas on the Substitute Reflection Form indicating their personal satisfaction with regard to their substituting experiences and their unique opportunities for growing their skills. *NENTA* substitutes themselves noted that the training, support and substituting experiences were better preparing them for later careers as teachers (hence, addressing the concern about the quality of entry-level teachers), especially through improving

their confidence levels, their better understanding of the professionalism requisite to successful teaching, and their opportunities to develop more enhanced classroom organization and management skills.

According to the beginning/ending semester inventories, *NENTA* substitutes indicated that they were more confident in their professional pursuits following actual substituting experiences. These teacher candidates stated that the training and experiences received had given them more of the tools necessary to better pursue their goals as professional educators. The most-mentioned areas of self-perceived growth were: classroom management, communicating with students and other teachers, teaching strategies, overall confidence, diagnosing student needs, and assessing student achievement.

Currently in the ninth year of this program, the evaluations continue to yield overwhelmingly positive results with respect to school administrator, teacher and *NENTA* substitute satisfaction. Classroom teachers continue to give the *NENTA* substitutes a very high satisfaction rating in all areas cited above, but the highest affirmation is their affirmative responses to wanting this substitute teacher to return to their classroom as a substitute.

As the program has progressed, there is evaluative evidence noting that *NENTA* students are becoming more introspective in their responses on the reflective feedback instruments and that they are using more specific terminology to identify and define instructional skills and strategies. The consistency of their use of the language of teaching and particularly the consistency of the application of specific research-based skills have helped them become even more effective as substitutes which will in turn bolster their confidence and capabilities as entry-level teachers.

Future of the Northeast Nebraska Teacher Academy

Clearly, this program is fulfilling its goals and mission in an overwhelming manner. Obviously it is in the best interests of all the participants that this program continues its service to the schools, teachers, students, but as importantly, for the benefit of those pre-service undergraduate teacher candidates who realize both intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes from their *NENTA* experiences. The data from the key assessments has shown clearly that future teachers (*NENTA* substitutes) who participate in this program gain valuable confidence, improve

capabilities necessary for success in their teaching careers, and that the K-12 students they substitute teach are experiencing more effective learning.

In the few years since its inception, *NENTA* has put forth efforts to distinguish itself nationally as a singularly unique response to a vexing educational dilemma. As we progress, we want to answer additional questions. Of primary importance is the determination as to how this type of experience assists in improving entry-level teacher quality from the perspectives of those entry-level teachers' primary supervisors (team leaders and principals). Also, we want to determine how providing high quality substitute teaching experiences to pre-service teacher candidates is or is not assisting to improve the competence and confidence of entry-level teachers from their own perspective.

Ultimately, we want to know how to impact more deeply the quality of the undergraduate experiences for students who are pursuing teaching as a career. While there are several strategies that could achieve that outcome, the four most obvious would be:

- 1) additional pedagogy for the all undergraduate education students provided by the various preparation workshops and/or coursework;
- 2) additional "real" classroom management experiences provided by the substitute teaching opportunities;
- 3) the practice of instructional delivery and curriculum interpretation in "real" settings also provided by the substitute teaching opportunities;
- 4) finding a way to bring this experience to a greater percentage of teacher candidates within our college and across the country.

Conclusion

In response to those critics outside the higher education circle who are crying for the reform of teacher education, we say leave teacher preparation to the experts. If you want to make a contribution, how about lobbying for a paralleling of the increased teacher stresses accompanying high stakes teaching and testing with increased teacher compensation? The sad fact is more and more teacher candidates are acquiring more and more college debt in order to pay for their dreams of becoming a teacher and after graduation are in growing numbers seeking employment outside of teaching to make enough money to pay off college loans before they're 40 years old. Others may be leaving the profession in the first years because they're well aware

that while life and work will always have stresses, that work doesn't have to include the "constant breath of the critics" on their necks. If the public, politicians and pundits don't see a problem with this scenario, they are lacking the vision (or honesty) to view the problem in its real form.

So, what should follow? Certainly not a speeded up version of "fast tracking" people into the teaching profession, but rather as stated earlier a richer, more realistic experience for teacher candidates which includes the opportunity to substitute teach for pay during their final semesters of undergraduate training to experience the "feel of what it's like" to make those dozens of decisions during a day of instructing, interacting and managing a classroom of students on their own. In this article we've described our answer to the aforementioned dilemma which was to identify and provide specific types of experiences for our teacher candidates that will better prepare them for professional success.

We have received inquiries from distant places concerning our unique program, and while we have made some initial dissemination efforts there is much more to do. There is nation-wide potential for replicating this program because it is a relatively low-budget operation which addresses a critical need, particularly for the nation's rural schools. We have clear evidence to indicate that this program has not only succeeded, it has flourished.

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